

The Direct Care Support Workforce & Individually Controlled Budgets

by Amy Hewitt, Ph.D.

...offering
information &
inspiration
to individuals with
disabilities and
their families
as they direct their
own supports and
services



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The use of individually-controlled budgets and the related flexible support and service options available to individuals and families is a relatively new concept. It has been provided to only a small percentage of citizens with developmental and intellectual disabilities. There are indications from early evaluation studies in Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey and Oregon that direct support workforce issues such as wages, turnover and recruitment difficulties can be lessened when individuals control their own budgets. In fact, two states reported that one of the main reason they initiated individually-controlled budgets and self-management of services was in response to the workforce crises.

Many individuals and families report that when they have control over who they hire and fire, they are able to find higher quality personnel and use particularly committed people such as friends and family for support providers. Studies indicate that direct support professionals (DSPs) are often paid higher wages when they work for people who control their own budgets. Families report they are actually able to get the services they have been authorized because they can find staff even when agencies cannot, and that they receive more hours of services than under agency-directed supports.

“...Families should be encouraged to think creatively about how to use their resources to shape individualized wage and benefit packages to meet the needs of their employees...”

There are other benefits as well. Studies indicate that people who control their own budgets have more self-determination and control over many aspects of their lives. For example, people go places they want to go, and choose what they want to do more often. This means that their DSPs must have the skills needed to support people with disabilities as they make their own choices and take more risks.

Irrespective of the type of services and supports people with developmental disabilities receive, it is critical that they have well-informed and stable direct support employees. If they are to be successful in controlling their own budgets and managing their own personnel, they need to use effective interventions to increase the probability that employees will be stable and well qualified for the positions they hold.

Because individuals and families who direct their own budgets have more flexibility and do not have administrative overhead costs, they are able to use fewer hours and pay DSP higher wages than an agency.

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Benefit Packages

In addition to maximizing the wage of DSPs, it is important for employers to ensure that DSPs have access to health insurance benefits. Purchasing these options through a fiscal intermediary (employer of record) can make these benefits more affordable. Other sought-after benefits include paid time-off for illness, personal reasons and childcare issues, and paid vacation. It is important to plan for and include these costs in the person's individually-controlled budget. Many individuals also offer to pay for college coursework or other training opportunities as part of the benefits package. Other benefits include creative options such as the use of bonuses. Some families have developed an 'outcome' bonus system whereby employees are assigned specific outcomes that they support the individual to achieve. If the outcome is achieved, they receive a bonus on their annual gross earnings. Other individuals and families have offered free room and board for students who work to support an individual with a developmental disability for 10-20 hours per week. Families should be encouraged to think creatively about how to use their resources to shape individualized wage and benefit packages to meet the needs of their employees and maximize retention.

In order to keep good employees, it is critical to *hire* good employees. There are several strategies that can help get the right people into direct support roles.

Inside Resources

One important strategy is to use inside resources to find potential employees. This means to use people who know the individual and/or the family to find

direct support personnel. People who are "on the inside" are most likely to give potential new employees the "real scoop" about what the job is all about. New employees who know what they are getting into are more likely to have their expectations met, and stay in their jobs after being hired. Many people who direct their own budgets have found great success in hiring friends, family and neighbors. One reason for this success is that such people already know the individual and his or her needs well – there are few surprises for the employee and an established relationship.

Realistic Job Preview

A second strategy to increase met expectations of employees is called realistic job previews. This strategy involves a systematic method of giving potential new employees realistic information about the job for which they are applying. Realistic information is defined as both the positive and not so positive aspects of the job from the perspective of others who currently do the job or have done the job (usually other direct support employees). This realistic picture should be provided to the potential employee before a job offer is made. Individuals and families can share this information in many ways including short videos that show the person and what support providers do, picture books that illustrate a "day in the life of...", a written script or document that the candidate reads or a day of observing other DSPs in action. In addition to including information about the job duties and role expectations, it is important to include information about benefits, rules and other information that those providing support feel is important to share with new DSPs. Whatever format is used should include a balanced vision

Hiring Great Staff: What Can You Do?

- Offer flexible schedules

- Offer higher hourly wages

- Offer flexible benefit packages that may include health care, education and training, and time off for illness or childcare issues

- Offer paid vacation

- Offer performance/outcome-based bonuses

- Offer room and board, or use of a car as part of salary

of the job from the DSP perspective and be provided before the job offer is made.

Referral Bonuses

Referral bonuses can yield employees who remain employed longer. This strategy invites existing employees to refer potential new employees. If the person referred is hired, the existing employee receives a bonus. It is often helpful to provide a small bonus at the time of hire and then an additional bonus (usually larger amount) at 6 months and 12 months. This encourages informal mentoring from the DSP who referred the new hire.

Targeted Recruiting

When looking for a new employee, it is important for individuals and families to consider the characteristics of their most successful and long-term DSPs. Once these have been identified, the individual

and/or family should purposefully seek other people with similar characteristics. For example, if they consider their best employee to be a young, energetic recent high school graduate, they should probably try to recruit this type of new employee. On the other hand, if they consider their best employee to be a stay-at-home dad who works on a part-time basis, then they are likely to be satisfied by candidates with similar characteristics. This is called purposeful targeted recruiting.

Structured Interviewing

Once candidates have been identified, it is important that each one be carefully interviewed. Interview questions should be planned ahead of time, behaviorally-oriented and designed to solicit information and allow prospective employees to demonstrate the skills required for the position. This strategy is called structured interviewing. Interviewers should ask only those questions that are designed to seek information or demonstrate the skills and attitudes needed for the job. For example, if it is important that an employee be flexible, tolerant of ambiguity, energetic and able to lift 150 pounds, the interview questions must be designed to reveal the extent to which the interviewee meets these requirements.

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Appropriate Training & Orientation

Direct support professionals have a lot to learn when they begin a new job, particularly if they have never worked in a direct support role before. Individuals and families play critical roles in providing orientation and training to new employees irrespective of whether or not the employee is working for someone who self-directs or is working for an organization. *Orientation* is an

opportunity to assist and support new employees in getting to know the person(s) to whom they're providing supports, their new responsibilities and other employees with whom they might be working. When working in a family home, it is important for new employees to learn about the family dynamics and expectations, and to begin to feel accepted. *Training*, on the other hand,

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New Directions
CCS Communications
P.O. Box 384
Hopewell, NJ 08525

or e-mail:

consid@comcast.net

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Editor: Brenda Considine

CCS Communications
P.O. Box 384
Hopewell, NJ 08525

phone/fax: 609-466-0694
consid@comcast.net

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is an opportunity for employees to learn the skills they will need to provide supports to the person(s) they have been hired to support. These skills may include healthcare treatments, personal care support, behavior support, and the use of adaptive equipment.

Individuals and families are often in the best position to teach these skills, so it is not surprising that people who direct their own services often prefer to train their staff. It is important, however, that supplemental training be provided in those areas that the individual and/or family does not feel adequately prepared as a trainer.

Other important day-to-day interventions

are those designed to motivate and recognize DSP for doing a good job. These can be simple "thank you's" or notes of appreciation. They can also include formal recognition activities such as nominating someone for an award or writing an article for a neighborhood newspaper about the person's community contributions. Ultimately, however, creating an environment of respect and appreciation is critical to the satisfaction employees feel and therefore their commitment to staying in their jobs and doing their best. Individuals and families know first-hand how important DSPs are to their lives – perhaps this is a unique reason why individuals and families who self-direct often report higher retention rates of their employees.

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New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities
P.O. Box 700
Trenton, NJ 08625

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